THE LIGHT BULB FAKE*

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Translated by Erich Ritter

"Grace comes from God; everything else one can learn."
--Nijinsky

Reading Pynchon, I learned about "The Story of Byron the Bulb," which originally was to be "manufactured by Tungsram in Budapest," but then, "at the last minute," was "reassigned to Osram in Berlin." This light bulb, as a matter of fact, was an "immortal" one that was persecuted by an organization named Phoebus and was to be destroyed. Concealed behind Phoebus was an "international light-bulb cartel, headquartered in Switzerland. Run pretty much by International GE, Osram, and Associated Electrical Industries of Britain, which are in turn owned 100%, 29% and 46%, respectively, by the General Electric Company in America. Phoebus fixes the prices and determines the operational lives of all the bulbs in the world" (649). I read this story about the chase of the immortal light bulb with suspense, yet as a fairly unimportant aspect of Pynchon's entire novel, and I soon forgot it.

Some time later I happened to come across a copy of Die Zeit in which Ulrich Greiner conducted an interview with Hans Magnus Enzensberger. I was reading pretty much without concentrating on anything in particular. However, a completely ridiculous sentence remained stuck in my head, precisely because it was so ridiculous: "Enzensberger got up to turn the light on. One of the table lamps beside the sofa made a clicking noise and remained dark. Enzensberger disappeared for a moment into the hallway, came back with a new light bulb, and screwed it in. Then he sat back down on the sofa again, etc., etc." Perhaps this sentence in this ridiculous interview would not have gotten stuck in my memory, but a little later I read in the Transatlantik an "Interview mit einem Hühnerficker" in which exactly the same sentence I just quoted from Die Zeit occurred; this time, however, the author was a "Jimmy Cooke." Banal, isn't it? But in the February edition of the New York Review of Books--I got hold of the issue somewhat later--there was an article by Sven Birkerts about the book Selected Essays of Eugenio Montale, an Italian poet, who had died in September 1981. The article began with the sentence, "Literary traffic

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between Italy and America has always been fitful," in order to render its opinion two paragraphs further down about the "fact" that Eugenio Montale had shocked his friends and guests on certain occasions by crushing burned-out light bulbs with his teeth. Their shards he then spit out. This not being enough, the article, at another place, dropped a remark about the "light bulb": "Of Campana, for example, whose excessive Rimbaudian style was far from Montale's own ideal of compression and clarity, he wrote: 'Dino Campana, who, as Cecchi has said, "passed like a comet," has written one of the greatest Italian poems about incandescent bulbs'!" The author of the review--Sven Birkerts--quoted this passage as an example of Montale's "objectivity" (or what have you). For me, however, it was simply proof that, during my recent reading excursions, the light-bulb-metaphor popped up strangely often. Yet this went on.

In Stern magazine I then read about a "mysterious fire" in a corset factory near Fürth, "mysterious," according to the Stern author, because an insurance swindle was supposed to have been covered up. For me, however, the whole thing was mysterious because the fire that destroyed the company's whole warehouse had caused all the light bulbs and neon tubes to burst. Then--I had gone for a few days to Berlin--in the editors' office at the taz, one of the editors for the culture section gave me an article to read about a strange "alternative Etablissement." The article was not signed. In the midst of it I caught, once again, the bulb sentence I had first caught in the interview with Enzensberger; only this time it was, instead of the poet, a woman without a name who went to the hallway to fetch a bulb etc. And then, as temporary end of this light-bulb-assassination-series, on my paranoid intuition I saw a film by Pakula on TV, Witness to a Conspiracy. In a rather unimportant scene, the star--Warren Beatty--screwed a light bulb into the socket of a floor lamp which stood beside his chair. I would have let it go at that and wouldn't have bothered any more, but then somebody showed me a video about the Rolling Stones, The First Twenty Years. In it, they showed a short interview with Bill Wyman--the last of the Stones, who still lives on the Côte d'Azur--and he had nothing else to say but "I change my light bulbs myself!"

That was enough. What the hell . . . I drove to the taz editorial offices in the Wattstrasse, went to the office of the editors for culture, sat down at an empty desk and started to phone around--one calls it "research" there. First of all, I listed all my light-bulb-experiences in a neat column. First step: "Thomas Pynchon"--the Rowohlt publishing house. I asked (on the phone) for the editors' office of the series "neues buch" that Rowohlt publishes. Delf Schmidt, who was on the line, connected me with his boss, Jürgen Manthey, not, however, without mentioning beforehand that "Pynchon" is a "Jahrhundertwerk." This, however, did me no good at all as far as my light-bulb-request was concerned. Manthey, too, could

not help me any further, yet he connected me finally with Ledig-Rowohlt himself. This fellow immediately said, "Pynchon--you have come to the right place. This is my man. I discovered him!" Unfortunately, all contacts with the author had to be made via Viking Press, but actually there was no contact at all with the author: even Viking Press itself would not know where he was hiding; even high-paying and reputable literary awards he would reject, and taken strictly, there was no human being around who knew him. All searches would somehow "end in the sand." On top of all this, it happened that a fire destroyed all the records in the college where he once studied; and the documents in the US Navy, where he once served, cannot be found anymore. "Mysterious": this was the word Ledig-Rowohlt used. For me, that was even more "suspicious."

Now back to the Enzensberger interview by Ulrich Greiner. He could not be reached anymore in the editors' office of Die Zeit. His secretary, however, gave me his home number. I was lucky. As he remarked somewhat hastily, he was just leaving to attend a boar hunt to which he had been invited, and thus stood like a soldier at attention, rifle at the ready, so to speak. . . . The latter I only thought of; I didn't say it. I asked him about the Enzensberger interview. Actually I was going to ask him about the light-bulb-passage and what he had in mind with it; maybe I could get some more information--not the "wattage" of course. But he was a little quicker than I, even a little more rushed, already somewhat grumpy. This, he said, was simply his style: to catch something atmospheric, mainly to quote from writings of the interviewee, not to ask questions and suggest answers, he said, but "to record." I did not even get to where I could clarify the misunderstanding when he had already taken his gun, cocked and aimed. The latter, of course, I only pictured. Already somewhat discouraged, I called the next address, the Transatlantik. Someone connected me immediately with the new publisher, Marianne Schmidt. She was more accessible. Yes, sure, they had already dealt with the author more than once, actually only with the office in which he worked. Office?! I did not quite understand. "Just a moment, please, I will try to find the correspondence for you. Here it is: 'Standard Text, Inc., German Branch.'" And then followed the exact address. I copied it, thanked the publisher, and put the receiver down. In order not to skyrocket the taz phone bill, I did not call the New York Review of Books. The Stern article was signed by a Werner Metzger. They told me in the editors' office in Hamburg that he was a correspondent in Ulm; they also gave me his address and phone number. I called there. A rather sleepy voice answered, "Media Matrix." I asked for a Mister Metzger. "Ahh, the article about the corset factory is actually not by me," he said. "I only received a phone call; from whom it came I actually cannot tell anymore. Is there anything wrong with it?" I calmed him down and thanked him for the information. But he was by no means calmed down. I interrupted the phone call and put the receiver down. I myself was not calmed down either.

In the late afternoon, I looked for the address of Standard Text. Its office was in Frankfurt-Bockenheim. When I arrived there, it proved to be located in the former office of a dentist, it seemed: there was a white dentist's chair at the end of the hallway which was painted black. About five people worked in different rooms; one could hear the hammering of typewriters. I was asked what I wanted and requested to talk to a Jimmy Cooke, saying I wanted to get more information about an article that was signed by him. A woman joined in and said that they normally did research about other people; it had not happened before that anybody ever did research about them themselves. There was, by the way, no writer by this name working for them; this was a pseudonym they would use once in a while. Who were "they," I asked back--stupidly enough, I admit. "They" are a text agency, branch of a firm in Berlin. She gave me the address, and I left.

When I called the taz the next morning, the cultural editor told me he had found out whence had come the article about the strange "alternative Etablissement" in which the light bulb quotation had occurred: from "Standard Text, Inc.--office Berlin." He had already been there, a first class address: Uhlandstrasse/corner Kurfürstendamm 1. They, however, did not tell him anything at all; rather, they threw him out politely: he should go, if he had questions, to the office in Amsterdam. They gave him the address, though. The editor gave it to me. And then he told me that, while he was sitting in a waiting room for a while in the Berlin office, he had leafed through an issue of the magazine Actuel, in which he happened to come across a marked article that dealt with, if not the end, then the on-going decline of the Parisian striptease establishments. Nothing particularly exciting, except that there was a passage saying that the artists must constantly have new ideas in order to attract a minimum of attention and interested customers. There was, for instance, at Chez Tout, a Jewish stripper named Sarah on stage, who would, as the crowning climax of her performance, get a light bulb to glow in her vagina. Could this be of any help, the editor wanted to know, in our research? The article, by the way, was signed by a (male or female) K. Jaubenstern. If I drove to Amsterdam, I asked, how could I recover my expenses? I should go there first, answered the editor; about the expenses we could talk later. And that was what I did then--the next day. I stayed several weeks in Amsterdam.

The ominous Standard Text agency could indeed be reached at the address I had, in the Herrengracht right next to the Institut vor Sociale Geschiedenis. But there they were even more suspicious than in the branch offices in Berlin and Frankfurt. This time, however, I remained tough. And finally I was lucky, or they just felt pity for me: the manager of the European Branch, Ruth Halberstam--she looked like a friendly copy of Margaret Thatcher--received me for a half-hour talk out of which grew an entire series of talks during which she told me

just about everything about her company as far as it was necessary for the "enlightening" of the light-bulb-events.

Ruth Halberstam was only one of three managers; the other two--Jacky Coyben and Dorothy Twither--worked in the United States. The Standard Text agency was the cover for a "society"--the "Arensberg Foundation." Since I had not heard of the name Arensberg, Ruth Halberstam read, during one morning session, a sequence from an interview with Marcel Duchamp in which he had spoken about Arensberg.

Duchamp had been a close friend of Arensberg, who had bought several objects from him; he had also provided him with a studio. Duchamp said about him:

> He was a nice guy, actually a poet. A graduate of Harvard who had enough money to live and who wrote imagistic poems. There was at that time an English literary school in New York, the Imagists, to which he belonged together with a whole bunch of other American poets, all of whom I later got to know.
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> But he was a difficult person, the wretch. He was somewhat older than I, not much, but since his rapid and widespread acknowledgement as a poet failed to materialize, he soon became tired of making poetry and stopped writing as early as about 1918-1919. He turned, then, toward a crazy hobby, cryptography, by means of which he attempted to decipher the secrets and enigmas of Dante in his Divine Comedy and of Shakespeare in his plays. Well, you know this anyway: who was Shakespeare, and who was he not, etc., etc. . . . ? With this kind of stuff, Arensberg busied himself for the rest of his life. He also published a book about Dante, at his own expense, of course, because no publisher cared about it. And, finally, he founded a company, the Francis Bacon Foundation, or something like that, with whose help he tried to prove that Bacon was the author of the Shakespearean plays. His system consisted of deciphering in at least every third line of the texts allusions to all sorts of things. The whole thing was a game for him, like a chess game of sorts, and he had a lot of fun with it. He had three secretaries working for him, and he bequeathed them so much money that they were able to buy a little house in California and continue his Shakespeare research. There you have the whole man.

I must admit I found all this rather amusing; however, it did not get me very much further. Ruth Halberstam explained to me: Arensberg bequeathed them more money than was actually necessary to continue his strange Shakespeare research, and they soon got tired of this work and started to look around for other projects. They were still young and ready for new things, back

then in the thirties and forties. They remained residents of California, but stayed, most of the time, in New York. Here, they got to know a group of young poets who were inspired by Rimbaud, Lautreamont, and the Surrealists. Most of them, however, had to join the service when the US entered the war, and they disappeared in the direction of Europe. Two of them even managed to get to their Mecca--Paris--which was declared a Forbidden Zone after all the Allies landed in Normandy. With full jerry cans and several cartons of Lucky Strikes, they deserted the 3rd Army and went underground in Paris, in the bookstore "Shakespeare & Company." Later on they were captured as deserters and were sentenced by a military court to several years in prison, where one of them died under mysterious circumstances; the other one came to New York after he was released, and soon the group met regularly again with their three supporters: Ruth Halberstam, Jacky Coyben, and Dorothy Twither. Together, they began to compile and publish a volume of poetry. When it was finished, Jacky Coyben proposed to publish it under the name of Jack Arnold, in memory of the private who had died in prison.

The poetry was mostly anti-war lyrics, and, contrary to all expectations, it became a big success. During the readings which Jack Arnold then was supposed to hold in bookstores and cafés, each single member of the group in turn read his or her own poems, and nobody ever noticed the non-existence of the poet Jack Arnold. All this encouraged the group to attempt some more coups with Jack Arnold. It was exciting to promote an author of whom oneself was a part. And then, of course, the academic critics and the reviewers were constantly trying to interpret the Arnold story by means of the data from either pre-adolescence, high school, or the military. Nevertheless, the group-poet disintegrated pretty soon, and each one now tried to make his or her own name on his own. Only one of the group became known as a poet: Ken Patchen, who, in the forties, published the novel Sleepers Awake, which had previously been written collectively as a pacifist pamphlet, under his own name. The three women continued their work--actually they now really began--began to write. And again, they signed texts with fake signatures, simply for the game's sake, and maybe also "because we were less out to get our names printed in bold letters than were the men," as Ruth Halberstam added. Besides that, they wanted their texts to be read instead of being grouped around or placed under the name of an author. During the forties and fifties they were thrilled and inspired by Beatnik poets. Then Ruth Halberstam moved to London. There she organized a so-called "Fait-Divers" department of their common project; e.g., she furnished certain ready-made aspects--mostly American ones--for any kind of books and articles by English writers who here and there lacked precision as to details and imagination. The authors paid for that. As time went on, an entire business emerged out of this for Ruth Halberstam and was similarly taken up in the United States by Jacky Coyben and Dorothy Twither. Afterwards Ruth Halberstam moved to Amsterdam; she had already

had to employ people there--mostly young writers, who, together with her, took care of the ever-increasing flood of jobs. Soon, they furnished, if ordered, theses for diplomas, for masters' and doctoral degrees, as well as little speeches and texts for authors already somewhat known who, for whatever reasons, had no time or were not able to do this--young writers who had been overvalued for a first, overrated publication and who had the whole world watching them from behind and looking over their shoulders, so to speak, and who therefore became unable to produce a single line; but also older, already more established writers who were shaken by their fame and were no longer able to do anything but mumble.

"I still remember the first text of this kind. We had put an awful lot of effort into it in order to capture the right tone, style or sentence and narrative structure of the person who finally had to sign that thing. But we had been by far too careful. Nobody ever came up with the slightest doubt; often writers thought they themselves had produced it." Ruth Halberstam laughed. At the beginning of the seventies there were similar groups in Germany and France which all worked under the company name Standard Text, in Düsseldorf even a group of painters--Standard Oil Painting--which, however, did not survive very long. "In order to reach an ever-increasing mobility, we had to furnish all sorts of texts, to channel them into all sorts of levels. In the United States, for instance, we produced some rather demanding texts under the name Pynchon, but we also produced commercial slogans, news, and pacifistic and Beatnik-like poems, some of which were even incorporated in anthologies. Furthermore, we wrote scripts for commercial spots, film scripts based on novels, novels based on films, eulogies, interviews--invented ones and real ones--etc., etc. In Germany we even worked for a while as 'informer': somebody, for instance, called up the FRG customs officers at the border with the GDR and asked how border traffic was being managed by GDR officials--reluctantly or otherwise, how long the car lines were--and then we called radio stations and news agencies and gave them the information. Each time they put that on air or on TV on the 8, 9, 10, 11, or 12 o'clock news, we earned 30 Marks, thus 150 Marks per day. And after a while one did not even have to call the customs officials any more; rather one could 'hallucinate' the truth right off, or however you might put it.

"But not only that kind of stuff. All news is being delivered by informers, even the weather forecast and the traffic. And something like this is slowly crossing the borderlines into concrete poetry." I would have liked Ruth Halberstam to tell me which well-known German and French writers were among her clientele, but she did not want to tell me any names. To lift the cover from Pynchon, on the other hand, would not pose any big problems, since even reviewers and critics in the United States have become convinced meanwhile of the collective authorship of his books. "Any indiscretion in this respect would harm our business (how many people do you think

would have to give back their academic degrees?) as well as the idea itself." But then, I wanted to know, wouldn't what she had already told me be too much? "First of all, we would have to check this here before it got published, and second, whatever I have told you so far is by the same token also publicity for us. Because of you, I made very expensive phone calls, but since in the end only Jacky Coyben opposed it . . ."

I was moved, yet I had some more questions to ask. Has it ever happened, I wanted to know, that one of your clientele was caught? "Yes, sure," Ruth Halberstam smiled and pushed her butterfly glasses up into her hair. "But most of the time, such things happened because of some sort of sloppiness. Many of our collaborators are free-lance writers, and sometimes we have to rely on somebody who just is not able to handle the job. The mistake, of course, is ours, of our offices which had not checked carefully enough before handing out the thing. There is, for example, the book The Fate of the Earth, which had been put together in the United States by a free-lance writer, under the name and by order of Jonathan Schell, and which had become a great success. Too great a success, for an Australian theologian--Grover Foley I think was his name--discovered in it several ideas, even entire passages which were copied from a book by the German philosopher Günther Anders. Anders' agent, therefore, sued our client Schell, who, then, on his part, came back to us for compensation, and not too small a compensation, for that matter. The trial ended with a compromise, but Schell's reputation as author seemed to have suffered somewhat from this. The next job for him, therefore, will be one that is going to be most carefully carried out--this much I can promise. A similar case was that of an academic work in the field of history which was produced in a German office for one of the princes of Hohenzollern and in which also a lot of plagiarism had been done, which caused the prince quite a bit of trouble. Another case was the job we did for Harald Szeemann, some kind of exhibition catalog for a Monte-Verità/Ascona exhibition. We did a sloppy job there too. Something like this is, of course, awful. Just botch! And I would not mention this, or only very reluctantly; however, I have to add that these are mere exceptions of which we do not have many. On the other hand, we have already received more than 500 literary awards worldwide, among which there are four Pulitzer awards and six Goncourts, which, of course, we do not possess. They dwell in the hands or the glass cases of our clients, who, however, paid us a certain percentage of the award money they received. The same is true for the ancillary rights and similar things: for instance, if the work is going to be translated and is being published in another country. In this respect an idea of Dorothy Twither's proved to be very useful, and we practice it these days more and more often. Suppose we are to furnish a publication for a geneticist about some aspect of drosophila research or, for that matter, do a research job about the assassination attempt on the Pope and its background (the result, however, should be that the curia stands behind all this), and both are supposed to be

published in German-speaking countries. For a little more money, we also supply, while we work on them, English translations which we will place in advance in the Journal for Genetic Studies or wherever, and in Playboy or the New Yorker, respectively. There are, of course, always cases where we are turned down, but these are only postponements for us. And later on, we offer these articles in German to the respective media as translations from English. This, then, has an effect on our reputation which almost always pays off."

Yet I wanted her to get to the center of my problem. But I had to be patient, for Ruth Halberstam had scheduled a conference with her staff which I was not allowed to attend. Meanwhile, I went to an Indonesian restaurant for lunch. Later on--my interview partner had ordered coffee sent to the visitors' room--I went right back to the core of my problem: what was all that with the light bulb story? I had already presented her with my light bulb list at the beginning of our talks. The only thing she said about it was that the list was by far not complete, but she did nevertheless pat my hand in acknowledgement. I blushed. Then she said, "Actually, the entire thing is rather banal, as you might have recognized in the meantime. One of our staff in London, Jack Moore of the Video Heads, who had worked for a long time in the office in Amsterdam, experimented for a while, together with Dorothy Twither, with several new media. Our problem is, where are we going to invest our profits--as deficit-write-off? With respect to this, the two of them wanted to come up with a Standard Film, together with some other people, Ed Sanders, for instance. But that thing never really got off the ground. Nevertheless, we had some nice little projects among them.

"Now you know the idea which stands behind our Standard project. This idea, however, never caught on as to our film thing. We only got some more or less decent stuff out of it, but this seemed not to be good enough for them. Well, then. Ed Sanders at least could realize a little bohemian idea: in each film project produced by Standard Film, some actor had to say at a random moment something in connection with the word 'light bulb.' And if not say, at least he or she had to screw a light bulb into or out of a socket. Ed had noticed that such a banal gesture had never occurred in a film; another banal act--to poop, for instance--would have been blown up into a trade mark. Imagine, there suddenly pop up films here and there in which people shit. That would have been too obvious. This gesture with the light bulb, this was a tiny hint that Standard was the originator. By now it has become an insider joke, which means that once in a while somebody in one of our offices smuggles a light bulb into our texts, and his or her colleagues giggle when they catch a light bulb during their daily reading. That's all there is to it. I have to admit, however, that once in a while all this has taken a horrible form, and often enough we have had to throw these light bulbs out of our finished texts."

"There are, however, a lot of other banal things or gestures left," I dared to intervene. "Sure," Ruth Halberstam grumbled. "If you really want to know, then I have to look for a book next-door; it's in there." She went to her office and came back after a little while with a book by Ed Sanders. While she was looking for a certain passage, she told me briefly what this was about: "We circulated at that time in poets' circles in the East Village, as Ed Sanders did, and years later he wrote an article about the scene, about the beginning and the high times of the New York Beatniks, rather ironically and intending to demystify the whole thing, but, of course, also because he needed money. Well. One event of that period he obviously rather liked, never mind whether it was true or not. But this thing he then elaborated in an article. I'll try to summarize it briefly. There they sat, the geniuses of poetry, already long-haired at that time and also bemused, in their usual café, the Rienzi, and suddenly a girl walked up to one of them who was sitting at a table. With trembling hands she fiddled a pile of papers out of her purse and stuck it under his nose, asking him whether he would mind reading it. At that time, women were even less tolerated on the battle front than these days. And this comic revolutionary poet, Levine by name, reacted accordingly. He skimmed over the stuff with a professional attitude and then pulled out his long fountain pen with eyes that did not look promising. This scene was watched by another poet from the next table, a guy named Barrett (the name was also invented by Ed Sanders!), and this guy also had a fountain pen in his hand with which he jotted down notes. There was a real fountain pen culture going around among these poets. Typically, the poetess did not have any name--probably also a former Standard contributor." Ruth Halberstam laughed grumpily. "But let me read you a passage from the Sanders article; then you'll have it precisely." She began:

> "I hope you don't mind," was about all Levine said, and hastily he cut several things, crossed out phrases and sentences and even--horror of all poet-horrors--rewrote entire lines. In short, he created a terrible chaos. She observed him quietly and with a pale face. "Do you see this line," he asked and turned the page a little so she could read it better. "I have understood nothing," he quoted. "You see, instead of nothing I usually write nil or zero, you see? Because nothing is so, ahh, so common, but nil is . . . more like, simply more like a poet would express himself!" She seemed not to be so sure about that. And when one saw how carelessly Levine crumbled the pages in his hand, then one knew for certain that he did not consider her a poetess at all. "I understood but nil," he read and seemed to be content and scribbled a new version on the paper. At the same moment Levine read the sentence aloud, another one of these guys with a worn red felt hat bent over from behind him towards the face of his female companion,

> stuck an ordinary light bulb under her nose and cried, "Prove to me that this light bulb exists. Prove it!" Barrett, completely beside himself, fumbled for his notebook and jotted down this unusual pair of pearls: I understood but nil. Prove to me that this light bulb exists. (Rienzi, July 1, 1959)

"You can check this in the manuscript collection of Brown University." Ruth Halberstam closed the book. Thus, this was the light bulb. "Isn't it a nice story?" she asked me. I was impressed, I must admit, and also somewhat satisfied. "Ed Sanders, by the way, is presently brooding over a new bohemian idea: Standard Pure. But don't press me for what this is going to be all about. I only recently heard of it from Dorothy." Now I had an idea: perhaps this is going to introduce a change in the Standard production, I suggested, which would mean that more and more clients will insist on signing the texts with S.P.--Standard Pure--because it will bear the seal of quality from the beginning. Like during the Renaissance in shops of certain craftsmen or later in the writing office of Dumas Pere . . . Ruth Halberstam interrupted: "This would be the 'K.O.' for Standard Text, Inc. . . . This is stupid--excuse me, but something like that is certainly not on Ed Sanders' mind. He already put that aside during his Beatnik-era. . . . Nevertheless, you almost touched upon a point, upon a development in our project, in our offices, which we haven't been able to get an overview of yet, but which more or less points in exactly the opposite direction from the one you just pointed to. During recent years we have had more and more top-notch contributors who have offered us their collaboration. I mean really established names, sometimes academic chairholders who have worked in our offices on the side, and this not only for financial reasons. And by no means do they pick, as far as their contribution is concerned, the raisins off the cake, so to speak. No, they too work within the entire range of what is there, like everyone else in their respective offices--at least as far as they are able to, or think they are able to. What tickles them about such a form of production is the anonymity that goes with it. By far the biggest share of our order we order ourselves, and it should stay like this. What this means is that we think up some kind of text, which we then place somewhere, perhaps under a real, established name, who is informed about this ahead of time. Then we draw up a contract, and the respective person gets the money, and we bank a certain percentage. Our contact with media and our overview, those probably are what attract these top-notch writers to us. And then too, which is good, there is this idea that challenges these writers: 'I want to circulate a text and see what it does, as text, without my name that has already been introduced anyway.'"

"What names, for instance, are these?" I insisted, wanting to know which well-known writers were among Standard Text's contributors. "This does not necessarily have to remain a

secret," replied Ruth Halberstam indifferently. "But I do not know them all by any means, and then there are, of course, many staff members who, besides their work in the office, contribute for themselves, during their hours off, so to speak. Then it happens now and again that somebody publishes scientific studies under his or her own name, about a dispute over nuclear energy, if you will, about astrophysics, or about the deciphering of Babylonian cuneiform, thus taking sides, so to speak; and then, in the Standard office he or she writes respective responses to his or her scientific counterpart as ordered articles. And for this job, s/he, I think, is probably the best equipped. However this may be, it happens at least as often that somebody gets the job of reviewing his or her own book, and don't you believe that they are not willing to write a biting review, that they are squeamish with themselves. Rather the opposite is the case. But names, yes I can give you names, of course: in the Paris office, for instance, are a few people from Critique, among others Michel Foucault and Michel Serres, both for different reasons. The latter knows an awful lot of philosophy professors who are stuck with a certain kind of anxiety that, in Paris, is called 'anxiety of white paper.' And because he does not want to publish all their ideas under his own name, he, once in a while--anonymously--writes for us.

Barthes often wrote for us. But this everyday-mythologian was unfortunately run over by a vegetable truck. It was important for him to work for Standard Text, Inc. because of his semiology, or his arthrology, to be more precise. Eric Ambler would be another one that could be mentioned. Some time ago Régis Debray worked off and on for us. But he, again, had different reasons, if you will. He got rid of things via our office which he could not have placed somewhere else under his name--probably because he was scared. That, too, happens once in a while; it is mostly Communists and Social Democrats, and it happens often in Germany, but also in Holland. Basically, however, a collaboration with this kind of people is not satisfying; that snuck in somehow, and we will get rid of it again. Very satisfying, however, was our cooperation with Jorge Luis Borges, which took place quite a while ago. That was a deal between him and our office in New York. He has been blind for many years, you know, and when that was not widely known, he had gotten occasional requests from editors and publishing houses, high-paying offers, to write something for them. However, he was not at all in the mood for doing this, was probably also a bit overburdened by it, even though he could have dictated this stuff, since he has everything worth quoting from Western culture in his head. Anyway, he then asked our office in New York, where a young Jewish (female) journalist who was friends with him worked, to write that stuff for him, and they later got full payment from him. In exchange for that, they then wrote some little things for him which were incorporated into his collected works. Isn't that something? But the most amazing thing about it is that a short story by Gombrowicz is among them. He had worked once for our office in

Berlin. Something happened there, however, on the other hand, which is not so amazing. In our Berlin office, we had somebody working--Kurt Bartsch--who published a book under his own name containing all the more or less accomplished plagiarisms which the staff there had compiled during the recent years. That he was vain (greedy) enough to do this, I don't give a shit, but he sabotaged by the same token a very interesting project of the office in Berlin: The Pierre Menard Project. This writer from Nimes who had died meanwhile had worked all his life long on Don Quixote, which would be fairly easy: no, he wanted to write the Quixote. To do so, he did not focus on a mechanical transcribing of the original; he was not after a mere copy. His admirable ambition aimed at bringing forth a few pages which--word for word and line by line--coincided with those of Miguel de Cervantes. And, except for a few little mistakes, he had achieved this. To bring this work of his to an end, as well as to begin other, similar works, was the objective of the Menard Project of the office in Berlin. And this lunatic Bartsch had made something ridiculous like this out of it. Oh, well. Let's forget it."

After this story Ruth Halberstam had the feeling of having told me enough about her firm. She emptied the rest of her coffee, which had gotten cold in the meantime, with a sweeping gesture. Then she accompanied me and my recording machine to the office of accounting and guided me toward a desk that had just become vacant, where I sat down to summarize all our talks and to type them. It took me two days. After I had finished it, I had to give her the finished manuscript for two days--to be checked. Then I could take it and go home, that is, drive back to Germany. I had an arrangement with the cultural editor of the taz to send him the material, which I did. In return, he forwarded a letter from the Berlin office of Standard Text, Inc. to me. In the letter, they asked me whether I would like to work for them--once in a while.